



British Foodways Throughout the Centuries

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“The British Empire was created as a by-product of generations of desperate Englishmen roaming the world in search of a decent meal.” –Bill Marsano

Medieval Period ca. 410-1500

England

While there were plates and bowls available, “trenchers” or stale bread were often used as plates for meals. Knives and spoons were used. Forks were still not commonly used.

Meat and fish were the main food in households of the aristocracy, etc. Meat was served in great variety, beef, pork, mutton, poultry, venison.

Müldner & Richards, “fast or feast: reconstructing in late medieval England...” 40.

The bulk of lower class diet was made up of cereals. Boiled pottage (a thick soup or stew made by boiling vegetables, grains and meat when available), was a mainstay. Milk, cheese and eggs were also an important source for protein.

Müldner & Richards, “fast or feast: reconstructing in late medieval England...” 41.

Ireland

95% of the meat consumed by all classes came from cattle, sheep and pigs. Nobility and the higher classes also supplemented this with wild game from their preserves. The wild game included deer, wild boar, and badger.

Fiona Beglane, “The social significance of game in the diet of later medieval Ireland,” in Food and Drink in Ireland; “Irish Medieval History,” Facebook, 19 January 2015.

While cereals and meats were “the cornerstones of the medieval diet,” bread and milk were the mainstay of Ireland’s national food until the close of the seventeenth century.

Oats and barley were the most popular of the grains.

“Diet in Viking-Age Ireland,” Battle of Clontarf,

<https://dh.tcd.ie/clontarf/Diet%3A%20What%20Did%20People%20Eat%20in%20Viking-Age%20Ireland%3F>

Scotland

The Scots diet “consisted of a fairly limited bill of fare composed of local foods: oats as chief cereal grain; root vegetables such as turnips and potatoes; leeks, cabbage and kale supplemented by wild vegetables such as nettles, sorrel and garlic; butter, cheese and other dairy products; fish, shellfish and seaweed; some meat and game; and numerous varieties of wild berries in summer.”

Katherine Czapp, “The Good Scots Diet,” <https://www.westonaprice.org/health-topics/traditional-diets/the-good-scots-diet/>

Oats “were hardly known on the continent . . . but were raised in Scotland to the highest perfection.” Oats and oatmeal were a Scottish staple for centuries and they believed it was what made their men strong.

Katherine Czapp, “The Good Scots Diet,” <https://www.westonaprice.org/health-topics/traditional-diets/the-good-scots-diet/>

Wales

Welsh food was usually cooked in a cauldron over an open fire and would be “reheated and topped up with fresh ingredients over a number of days.” Gerald of Wales wrote in 1188, “The whole population lives almost entirely on oats and the produce of their herds, milk, cheese and butter. You must not expect a variety of dishes from a Welsh kitchen, and there are no highly-seasoned titbits to whet your appetite.”

“Welsh cuisine,” Wikipedia.com, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Welsh_cuisine

Leeks were an important component of many Welsh dishes and even became a national symbol of the Welsh.

Welsh rarebit was being made in medieval times and by the 1500s was considered a national dish.

“Welsh cuisine,” Wikipedia.com, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Welsh_cuisine

Elizabethan Period 1558-1603

England

The Elizabethans believed in “head to tail” eating.

“The Supersizers Go...Elizabethan,” JustHungry.com, www.justhungry.com/the-supersizers-go-elizabethan

Ireland

The potato arrived in Europe in 1570 and shortly thereafter arrived in Ireland. The nutritious potato became the staple of Irish food and the population began to grow. The “diet comprised mainly of potatoes and milk” which was monotonous but very healthy.

“Food in Ireland, 1600-1835,” www.dochara.com/the-irish/food-history/food-in-ireland-1600-1835

Restoration Period and Eighteenth-Century, 1660-1785

England

“Meat made up a large portion of the diets...of eighteenth-century England.” Meat included beef, lamb, mutton, pork, rabbits, chickens, pigeons, etc. Because of the high demand for meat, the quality was generally rather poor, especially for the lower classes.

“The Supersizers Go...Restoration: No water, lots of meat,” JustHungry.com, www.justhungry.com/the-supersizers-go-restoration-no-water-lots-meat; “Types of Food in Eighteenth Century England,” www.umich.edu/~ece/student_projects/food/foods.htm

Wealthy English consumed almost 9 lbs. of sugar a year. Chocolate was a novelty during the 1700s.

"Types of Food in Eighteenth Century England," www.umich.edu/~ece/student_projects/food/foods.htm

Gruel was a common dish made of oatmeal, a little butter, and usually containing alcohol, most often wine.

"Types of Food in Eighteenth Century England," www.umich.edu/~ece/student_projects/food/foods.htm

Scotland

While the wealthy ate "copious amounts of meat, especially roasts," the common people ate very little. Most people had a "fairly frugal diet of 'brooses' made from barley, oats, beans and pease cooked in a cauldron over an open fire."

"Food in Scotland," Lifting the Lid on Scottish Food History, <http://digital.nls.uk/learning/scottish-food-history/food-in-scotland/index.html>

It was claimed Scots didn't eat many vegetables but even the poorest Scots added kale to broth for flavor and nutritional value.

"Food in Scotland," Lifting the Lid on Scottish Food History, <http://digital.nls.uk/learning/scottish-food-history/food-in-scotland/index.html>

Regency Period, 1811-1820

England

Like previous generations, the regency generation ate a lot of meat. But now even the middle class consumed a significant amount of meat.

"English food in the 1800s" What did we eat?" <http://www.essentially-england.com/english-food-in-the-1800s-what-did-we-eat.html>; "Family Dinners, Regency Style," Jane Austen's World, <https://janeaustensworld.wordpress.com/2009/11/26/family-dinners-regency-style/>

This was also the period when what we know as the traditional English breakfast of eggs, bacon, ham, etc. started to become popular.

"English food in the 1800s" What did we eat?" <http://www.essentially-england.com/english-food-in-the-1800s-what-did-we-eat.html>; "Family Dinners, Regency Style," Jane Austen's World, <https://janeaustensworld.wordpress.com/2009/11/26/family-dinners-regency-style/>

Nuncheon or a light lunch was a relatively new concept that had derived from snacking. It was taken sometime between 1:00 and 3:00. It usually included cold meats, stilton cheese (with optional maggots), cheddar cheese (with cheese mites), cucumber salad, bread, fruit and sweets.

"The Supersizers Go ... Regency," Just Hungry, <http://justhungry.com/the-supersizers-go-regency>; "English food in the 1800s" What did we eat?" <http://www.essentially-england.com/english-food-in-the-1800s-what-did-we-eat.html>; "Family Dinners, Regency Style," Jane Austen's World, <https://janeaustensworld.wordpress.com/2009/11/26/family-dinners-regency-style/>; "Mealtimes," The Regency Town House, <http://www.rth.org.uk/regency-period/family-life/mealtimes>

Ireland

Breakfast for the wealthy land holders included buttered toast and cake, washed down with expensive draughts of tea or coffee. It might also include mutton chops, kippers and boiled eggs. Marmalade became popular at this time.

"Mealtimes in the Irish Country House,"

<http://www.emocourt.net/Food/5.%20Mealtimes,%20breakfast,%20lunch%20and%20afternoon%20tea.htm>

Caudle was usually consumed shortly before bedtime. Caudle was gruel with wine, eggs, sugar and spices.

"Breakfast, dinner and supper in Georgian Dublin," History Ireland, <http://www.historyireland.com/18th-19th-century-history/breakfast-dinner-and-supper-in-georgian-dublin-2/>

Victorian Period, 1837-1901

England

"Even the simplest of middle class breakfasts consisted of bacon, eggs, ham, haddock, toast, coffee and fruits."

"History Cookbook: Victorians Food Facts," Cookit!, <http://cookit.e2bn.org/historycookbook/23-116-victorians-Food-facts.html>

The concept of tea time filtered down to the middle and working classes and was accompanied by pastries and small sandwiches.

The food became much more simple and straight-forward than in previous times.

"History Cookbook: Victorians Food Facts," Cookit!, <http://cookit.e2bn.org/historycookbook/23-116-victorians-Food-facts.html>

When the Victorian upper class dined alone, they ate five or six courses. An example of a typical dinner:

Savory Soup

Roast Turkey with Dressing or

Roast Pork with Specialty

Potatoes or Chicken

Fricassee served with Rice

Two Vegetable Side Dishes

Citrus Ice

Fresh Dinner Rolls with Sweet

Cream Butter

Jams, Jellies & Sweet Pickles

Fancy Cake & Preserved Fruit

Coffee, Hot Punch & Water

"Upperclass Victorian Era Cooking Dinner Courses, Meals, Foods," The Victorian Era England facts about Queen Victoria, Society & Literature, <http://www.victorian-era.org/victorian-cooking-upperclass-dinner.html>

"A typical poor family living in a town would have had about 12 shillings to spend on food each week. ... Most of the week's money was spent on bread leaving little for other necessities." Other food might also include milk, cheese and potatoes. Poor families could only afford meat once a week and that was usually eaten on Sunday.

Typical of other time periods, alcohol like beer and gin was easier to obtain than clean drinking water.

"What did the poor eat?", Victorian Durham,

<https://community.dur.ac.uk/4schools.resources/victoriandurham/health7.html>

While eel pies and other types of eel dishes had been popular for centuries, they were so plentiful in Victorian times that they became "a poor man's hearty meal."

Danny Hakim, "Tasting Victorian London, One Eel at a Time," New York Times,

<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/14/travel/eating-eels-london.html>

In the last decades of the Victorian era, fish & chips shops became popular. Throughout this period, curries and other foreign foods became popular among the English because of the influence of the worldwide British Empire.

Ireland

Irish upper classes had the same dining habits as their English counterparts.

Irish upper classes usually had the following:

Breakfast between 9-10:00

Lunch between noon and 1:00

Tea between 4:00-5:00

Dinner between 8:00-9:00

"Mealtimes in the Irish Country House,"

<http://www.emocourt.net/Food/5.%20Mealtimes,%20breakfast,%20lunch%20and%20afternoon%20tea.htm>

By the 1800s, everyone, from the wealthiest down to the poorest, ate potatoes.

Even in the homes of the better off of the working classes, potatoes were used to extend the meal. Some of the traditional Irish meals reflect this:

Boxty – fried potato cakes

Champ – potatoes and scallions

Colcannon – potatoes and cabbage

Irish Stew – poorer cuts of meat, potatoes, and vegetables

"Food in Ireland 1600 – 1835," DoChara: Insider Guide to Ireland, <https://www.dochara.com/the-irish/food-history/food-in-ireland-1600-1835/>

The Great Famine and potato blight was devastating for the Irish poor because men on average ate 10-15 pounds of potatoes a day while women ate 7-10 pounds.

"Food in Ireland 1600 – 1835," DoChara: Insider Guide to Ireland, <https://www.dochara.com/the-irish/food-history/food-in-ireland-1600-1835/>

By the end of the 19th century and throughout most of the 20th century, bread, potatoes and porridge still formed the staple diet of the poor. There was also an increased

consumption of dairy products and meats. The main meal of the day “invariably comprised meat, potatoes and vegetables, usually cabbage, carrots, turnips, parsnips or peas.”

“Food in Ireland after the Famine,” DoChara: Insider Guide to Ireland, <https://www.dochara.com/the-irish/food-history/food-in-ireland-after-the-famine/>

Edwardian & Pre-War Period, 1901-1914

Breakfast among the wealthy was taken between 10:00-12:30 and included fruit, then a bowl of mush and cream, followed by the plates of hot breakfast foods. A dessert of frozen punch, pastries and jellies and coffee concluded the meal.

Camille Hadley Jones, “An Edwardian Breakfast,” Edwardian Promenade, www.edwardianpromenade.com/food/an-edwardian-breakfast/

Those in the middling classes ate their breakfasts with more discretion. They were advised to include:

- Porridge
- Haddock, Sardines, Kippers
- Bacon
- Eggs or Omelet
- Cold Tongue
- Potted Meat
- Fried Potatoes
- Toast, Hot Rolls, Scones

Camille Hadley Jones, “An Edwardian Breakfast,” Edwardian Promenade, www.edwardianpromenade.com/food/an-edwardian-breakfast/

Poor families still subsided on bread and jam, potatoes and bacon. Poorer families usually only had meat once a week and then it would be the cheaper meat like chops or kippers.

“Edwardians and WW1,” Cookit!, <http://cookit.e2bn.org/historycookbook/index-22-edwardians-and-ww1.html>